

had small respect for pilgrims and pilgrimages. Just before the first appearance of Piers Plowman in the Vision that bears his name, the poet and his company meet a palmer loaded with the customary symbols and relics from half the shrines of Christendom. ' Knowest thou ought a saint men call Saint Truth ? Canst thou wissen us the way where that he dwelleth ? ' asks Langland. ' Nay,' replies the pilgrim, * so G-od glade me ! ' Truth is not the sort of saint that palmers go to seek.¹

Even for the most superstitious and degraded of those who travelled to Rome on these errands there was some element of real penance in the act of pilgrimage. But in the mere hawking and sale of pardons for sin by the ecclesiastical authorities to those who sat at home, we reach the lowest depth to which religion can be dragged. The Papal Court was the centre whence pardons and indulgences were sent out. But the English Episcopate must share the blame with the Pope. Instead of withstanding and denouncing his emissaries when they came on such missions, instead of warning the people against Pardoners and their wares, they encouraged the sale, and made what profit they could out of it themselves. It cannot be pleaded in their excuse that every one then believed in the pardons. Enough believers were found to make the sale go merrily, but the representatives of what was best in that age saw through the absurdity with as clear an eye as Luther. Not only did Wycliffe wage war upon it, but Chaucer the worldly-wise man, and Langland the Catholic enthusiast, hated the sale of indulgences with all the force of intellectual scorn and moral indignation. What some of the middle classes thought of it, may be seen by mine Host's unprintable reply to the Pardoner of the * Canterbury Tales,' when he offers to sell his wares to his fellow-pilgrims. But the Bishops and the Church authorities, instead of leading the nation, held it back. It was left to the heretic priest and the layman to point out the spiritual road on which the nation was destined to travel.

A Pardoner was a Papal agent who travelled through England selling indulgences and relics on behalf of his

¹ *P. Pl.*, A, vi. 23; also C, i. 47-50.